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TRUTH AND LIES.

The two versions of Tennessee Williams' CAT
ON A HOT TIN ROOF.

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THE TWO VERSIONS OF 'CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF' BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS.

The scene is the Mississippi Delta, -- the quiet, mellow house of the richest cotton planter there. The mellowness of this house is felt throughout the play: it is perfectly conveyed by the image of sunlight pouring through shutters in the late afternoon. The author insists that it be there, a deliberate part of the design, so that even the 'dread of death' should be 'gently touched and soothed by it'. The house and the plantation outside are the element of eternity in the play -- the silence which devours all the quarrels, lies and 'poisonous thoughts', and renders them null.

Big Daddy, the cotton planter, has cancer and will not live long. He has a son named Brick, married to a robust, handsome young woman called Margaret. They are childless. The play centres largely on the relation between Big Daddy and Brick. Big Daddy -- a violent, plain-speaking, despotic man -- is closer to Brick than to anyone else in the family, though Brick says little these days and is an alcoholic. Big Daddy's personality is strikingly presented the moment he walks on the stage: a birthday party has been arranged for him -- the clergyman and the local doctor are there -- and his first word when ~~they~~^{Brick} tells him 'Congratulations!' is '-- Crap...'. He has had enough of humbug. He has slept with his wife mechanically for several decades, yet he can't bear her smell, her voice, the sight of her body -- so he tells his son in their great dialogue together. It seems that the play takes place during those first moments of real honesty in the family:

it is the painful revelation of a lifetime of lies.

There are several obvious lies in the play, all of which are felt most strongly by Big Daddy and his favourite son, Brick. There is the lie that issues from the good, warm body of Big Mamma -- that everything is all right and that Daddy is only saying 'Crap' to everything because he is in a bad state of nerves. There is the lie that Big Daddy's other son, Gooper, and his wife really love him as much as they profess: they have come with their five monstrous children ('no-necks', Brick's wife calls them) to be in at the death, so to speak, and to get the management of the cotton plantation; in fact, Big Daddy detests both them and their children. There is the lie that Big Daddy's examination at the clinic showed a negative result and that he only has a 'spastic colon' after all, not cancer. There is the lie in Brick's life -- that he has taken to drink because his athlete days are over (he was a celebrated athlete), while in fact it is because his best friend Skipper committed suicide after declaring a homosexual attachment to him which he rejected absolutely. There is the lie in Brick's marriage -- he no longer sleeps with Margaret, apparently because he no longer finds her attractive, but in fact, as she points out, because the memory of Skipper is haunting him and turning him against her, the wife who interfered in their relation. And finally there is the lie -- but less obvious than the others -- that Brick feels great horror first at the mention of Skipper's name, and secondly at the imputation that he has had a 'dirty', that is to say, homosexual, relation with him. Neither he nor the other characters explode this lie. And here is perhaps the chief

weakness of the play -- that a lie lurks there unexamined by the author.

We pay a lot of attention to Brick. He is a golden boy in the twilight of his youth, and the effects of alcohol are not yet visible on him. He is silent, melancholy and shrewd. As a character he is the integrity and inwardness of the play. He will not sell himself to lies -- except one, that about Skipper, which is too painful to face. Yet the exact nature of that pain is not clear to us: is it due to the fact that he feels he has killed the young man? is it because of that 'dirty' imputation -- the message he reads in other people's eyes? is it because he is in fact a homosexual and will not -- cannot out of compassion for his wife, perhaps -- face it? Whatever the answer, his horror about the whole thing seems to be exaggerated -- and the exaggeration explains one of the dramatic failures of the play, that in the dialogue between him and his wife (Act One) when she is talking to him very straight about his feelings for Skipper and he -- outraged and saying nothing -- keeps aiming at her with his crutch. The failure is helped by the fact that the crutch itself is of false dramatic importance: it does not indicate to us, 'This man is a cripple from life'; it cannot be regarded as a mark of destiny, like Oedipus' eyes streaming with blood, because it is the result of a tumble he has had the night before trying a hurdle when drunk -- a broken ankle. It can only arouse sentimental pity. But this would not be a serious criticism if Brick's feelings were convincing, if we could feel with him first his horror that Margaret should bring Skipper into the conversation at all and secondly his horror that she should

defile his friendship with words -- 'name it dirty' -- which in any case she does not do since she says at the outset, 'It was one of those beautiful, ideal things they tell about in Greek legends, it wouldn't be anything else, you being you...'. If he had merely felt guilty at the thought of having driven his best friend to suicide everything would have been clear and the drama would have looked after itself. But because we cannot see exactly where Brick's horror lies we cannot feel with him while he is hitting out at Margaret -- though we are expected to do so since he does not speak.

The fact is that nowadays, when homosexuality is, of not more practised, at least more discussed than at any previous time in Christendom, few of us feel horror at the mere mention of the term. All right -- let us say that Gooper and his wife (from whom the imputation mostly comes), perhaps Big Mamma also, would simulate horror, even feel it, being on the side, so to speak, of social humbug. But Big Daddy has had enough of lies. And when he discusses Skipper with Brick in the second act he shows very clearly that he has no inhibitions on the subject at all. In fact, he says, 'I knocked ^round in my time' and 'I seen all things and understood a lot of them'. Agreed that Brick himself may feel very sensitive about the imputation, especially as he has been an athlete working with people who despise 'ducking sissies' and 'queers' (as he himself calls them in an outburst of indignation), but this sense of outrage does not tally with the rest of his nature, which is withdrawn, quiet and wryly aware of the fact that all righteous attitudes taken up by people have a questionable origin. We feel he would merely shrug the thing off, as he shrugs off ~~Gabarrin~~

Gooper's greed and the unpleasant reference of Gooper's wife to the fact that he and Margaret no longer sleep together (both Gooper and his wife are righteous people). The author tells us himself that Brick has that charming 'cool air of detachment that people have who have given up the struggle'. There is a kind of heroic resignation about him which Big Daddy clearly admires even while it worries him. And this exaggerated horror over the use of a name -- 'You think me and Skipper did, did, did! -- sodomy! -- together?' -- is not heroic, much less resigned. It would be heroic if it were his central conflict in the play, if he were terrified for his personal reputation, but this is clearly not the case: he does not seem to care very much about his reputation, now that his heyday is over. His horror is that induced by humbug -- the very humbug he pitches himself against.

The real horror of homosexuality, ~~the real suffering~~ -- that in the end it is a solitary act -- is not touched upon. We are only presented with the social horror -- that it is something practised by people whom Gooper would consider outsiders. It is not treated square-on as a living problem, a source of pain and ~~terrible~~ guilt, which the theme suggests it should have been.

Had Brick been a homosexual and afraid to confess it; had he killed his friend in cowardice, by failing to admit that he shared his feelings; had he resolved to go on living with his wife and crush his other desires, or to abandon her while still feeling a certain love and compassion for her -- this would have been a real dramatic conflict. It would have made the play a tragedy, in place of a stirring spectacle of family passions, of

the will to truth against the will to humbug.

But even this contrast between truth and humbug (Big Daddy, Brick and Margaret versus Gooper and his wife, with Big Mamma in her goodness trying to make peace between them) is lost -- thrown away rather -- in the Broadway version of the third act. And here, it seems to me, is the second example of the author's subservience, quite unwittingly, to social instead of real values -- his subservience to the question, 'What will people think?' instead of 'What do they feel?'

This act (in both versions) centres round a family meeting organised by Gooper and Mae to tell Big Mamma that her husband has cancer after all, not a spastic colon, as she still thinks. But Gooper's real object is to get a plan before her concerning the disposal of the huge estate, which he has drawn up in the presence of ^{another} lawyer. She will hear none of this. She is distraught and obstinately unbelieving at the same time. Only Brick's presence is a consolation to her, and in a sudden access of love she tells him that if he could give Margaret a child it would be Big Daddy's 'dream come true'. Like Big Daddy, she has turned against Gooper and Mae. For they have no reverence and no real awareness of other people. Even before death they have no reverence. They see nothing beyond their own interests and the social form of a thing.

In the first (unperformed) version of this act we see Gooper and Mae 'preparing' her for the shock of the truth. They nudge and poke and make faces at each other. When Gooper is about to speak his wife stops him and hides his words in a burlesque fashion with 'A breeze! A breeze!' It is clear that they are both excited, even sadistically excited, and that

Big Mamma's feelings have no meaning for them at all, -- only the social form means something to them, so that it can be put on record at a later date that they did and said all they should have, and set their faces properly.

As characters they are overdrawn. But that is just as it should be. They are almost an allegorical representation of Humbug. They have the contempt for each other, the rude familiarity and brittleness of a couple plotting murder. Mae gives her husband an unexplained poke as she passes him, and he returns this with a quick slap, while all the time he continues gazing at his mother. He even seems to enjoy the thought of his father's death and agony. When Big Mamma tells them all how well ^{Big Daddy} ~~he~~ has been eating ~~Gooper~~ ^{he} says -- 'with grim relish' -- 'I hope he don't have to pay for it later on', and later he says, again with relish, that they (the cancer patients) certainly do 'get sly' about their pain, meaning they often deny it. And Mae, when the news has at last been broken to Big Mamma, utters her wretched, 'That's why he's turned yellow, Mommy!' -- as if he were a thing of skin and bone, merely unpleasant to handle.

The point is that Gooper and Mae are never in a living contact with other people, only a kind of mental, observing one. They prefer the safety and sameness of purely social relations, for in this way they are never hurt or involved by other people; everything is fixed and predictable, and their egotistical interests cannot be deflected. For the technical civilisation requires that people keep their distance from each other, there being work to do and certain hours to do it in. A man can't afford to lay himself open to pain or passion. He can't go too

deep into life; strong feelings acknowledge no timetable, and they bring in no money.

New Brick, Margaret, Big Mamma, even Big Daddy with his ruthless pursuit of money-power, belong much more to the South, in feeling. It is this which gives them the power of honesty. Their humanity has not yet been smothered under social forms. The house and the plantation are still the mysterious and eternal background of their lives, or rather the only harmony in their lives. But for Mae and Gooper the house and plantation are simply an 'asset' -- to be managed on a strict technical basis. They are completely sold to the civilisation of the North.

In the first version Brick says no more than a few words from beginning to end of the act. But his presence -- bearing sad, unspoken reflections about men -- is always felt. When he comes in for the 'family conference' he goes straight to the bar and begins pouring himself a drink, then, as if just remembering his manners, ~~he~~ turns to the others and says, 'I'M sorry! Anyone else?' When Gooper and Mae call on the doctor to break the bad news -- they do so like chairmen -- he suddenly says, 'Ssssh!' then 'grins and chuckles and shakes his head regretfully'. '-- Naw! --that wasn't the click', he says, -- the click being his moment of lapse into ^a state of peace, which comes every day after a certain number of drinks. He has no reverence for social form; and with these two sentences he has said enough to give his silence through the rest of the act meaning and dramatic force. Just as Big Mamma is about to realise the truth -- cancer! -- he begins singing, and Gooper cries out, 'Shut up!'

Margaret is more outspoken. She accuses Gooper of avarice, avarice, greed, greed, and he almost strikes her. She says 'hissingly', to herself, 'Poisons, poisons, venomous thoughts and words! In hearts and minds ! That's poisons!'

As for Big Daddy, he makes no appearance. We only hear his first cry of agony from another room, as the disease really takes hold of him. We do not know which of the two sons he will favour in the inheritance. We do know that he loves Brick and dislikes Gooper. The inheritance is -- in the first version-- a superficial element in the plot, and rightly so. There is only the sense of a victory of truth.

In the second, performed version all this is lost. The Broadway producer's objection to the original version of the third act was a valid one -- that Big Daddy was too important a character to be heard only as an off-stage cry. It is true that we do miss him, but his appearance in the revised version does not help matters at all. In fact, it ~~seems to~~ reduce the theme from the heroic and essentially mysterious level to the social one. It turns the play into the simple question, 'Who will he favour in his will, -- the efficient Gooper or the wayward, alcoholic Brick?' Big Daddy comes in, aware now that he will certainly die of cancer, recites a ribald story which is clearly directed against Gooper and his wife, whose humbugging Brick has exposed by denying (only to Big Daddy) the clinic's fake report, and he leaves again clearly intening^d to make his will in Brick's favour.

Gooper and his wife become milder people, but are less real now in their malevolence. We no longer see them exchanging glances, nudging and poking and making faces. A magnificent

portrait of a mean, whispering couple -- always hiding the truth because, like all those without reverence in life, they believe others can't bear to face it -- is ~~fundamentally~~ diminished. The starkness of the conflict -- truth or lies -- is no longer there. Everything is played down. The author removes the phrases 'with grim relish' and 'with relish' from Gooper's two unpleasant remarks about his father's disease. Gooper now answers the doctor's 'Keep your chin up, Big Mamma' with the mild, 'She's goin' to keep her ole chin up, aren't you, Big Mamma?' instead of the openly vulgar, 'She's gonna keep both chins up, aren't you, Big Mamma?', as in the first version. The italics are removed from Mae's 'That's why he turned yellow, Mommy', stripping it of the sense of deliberate malevolence. In the first version, when Big Mamma tells Mae that Gooper never really liked Big Daddy, Mae answers 'as if terribly shocked', 'That's not TRUE', whereas in the second version she answers simply (no stage directions), 'That's not true', helping us to see Gooper more as the unwanted son smarting against Big Daddy's neglect of him than as a villain. But it is now too late for our sympathies to be engaged on his behalf.

Brick becomes too much the decent fellow. He ~~says~~ says too much. He dramatises himself: 'I've lied to nobody, nobody but myself... The time has come to put me in Rainbow Hill, put me in Rainbow Hill, Maggie...' He ~~comes down~~ ^{comes down} to the sentimental look-at-me-I'm-suffering-but-keeping-hold-of-my-manhood-and-swearwords mood, which is the most sickening in modern American literature: 'Hello, moon,' -- he is outside, addressing the sky -- 'I envy you, you cool son of a bitch'. And to Margaret he says of the family conference -- what we ~~might~~ have gathered

by this time -- 'I can't witness that thing in there'. His mystery is gone, and with it the play's. There is an unpleasant get-together of (now) decent people -- Big Daddy, Brick and Margaret -- against Mae and Gooper, for whom we begin to feel a rather shameful sympathy. 'Ain't I tellin' this story in decent language, Brick?' Big Daddy asks. & And the answer is, 'Yes, sir, too ruttin' decent'.

The effects of the second version on Margaret's personality are ^{now} as ~~deplorable~~ ^{end}, -- perhaps more so, because originally she had a superb robustness, with ^{home} ~~no admixture~~ of the Protestant Ideal of Womanhood ~~simplicity~~, all sweetness and light, ^{mixed with it.} She now remonstrates with Brick: he must do the decent thing and come in and stand by his mother during the family meeting. She is reduced to 'common decency and fair play' talk, which belongs to Gooper. Her 'avarice, avarice, greed, greed' loses the sting of its italics. She no longer hisses 'Poisons, poisons! Venomous thoughts and words!' but merely says it, again without italics.

To fill the gap of a real conflict in the revised version false dramatic ~~tricks~~ ^{tricks}, of an hysterical origin, are invoked. There is a storm which, since the heroic theme has been ^{dis}spiated, appears simply as an accident of the weather. Sudden sights and sounds are clearly designed to alarm and disturb the audience in a second-rate fashion. 'Children commence crying... barnyard animals in terror, papers crackling, shutters rattling... Inexplicably, Daisy (a ^{servant} ~~maid~~) hits together two leather pillows... Strange man runs across lawn.' The word -- a play's only power in the end -- capitulates to sight, which is proper to the film.

As we know, one of Big Daddy's great disappointments is that Brick has no child. Now in both versions Margaret decides to force the situation by telling a lie: in the first version she tells Big Mamma that she is about to have a child, and Big Mamma rushes off to tell her husband; in the second she tells Big Daddy direct, and ~~it~~ probably this information is uppermost in his mind when he goes out to prepare his will. Gooper and his wife know it is false, because Brick never sleeps with her. And, naturally, Brick knows also: but he stands by Margaret. In the first version he simply says nothing, and she is only thankful that he does not interrupt her, which it is very like him to do. But in the second version he comes forward and vindicates her by telling another falsehood, that they have been sleeping together -- a quite unnecessary lapse of character, too obvious for the delicate balance hitherto kept by the play.

But this is less serious than the fact that the end of the play, which ~~was splendidly evocative of~~ ^{at least evoked} afterthoughts in the first version, is a degradation of the whole theme in the second. In the first version Margaret forces Brick to give her a child by taking all the bottles of liquor out of the room, then throwing his crutch out of the window so that he can't walk. She says, 'We're going to making the lie true, and when that's done, I'll bring the liquor back here and we'll get drunk together'. And Brick's last words -- in answer to his wife's, 'I do love you, Brick, I do' -- are 'Wouldn't it be funny if that was true?' Now these words have been spoken before, by Big Daddy, in cynicism, when Big Mamma says much the same as Margaret has just said. And so we are left with the feeling that the mellow house and the plantation have won over the quarrels

and the 'poisonous thoughts', that life is to be repeated, in children and further inheritance, with the sunlight still coming through the shutters in the late afternoon.

But in the second version the element of eternity is forgotten. The question of Big Dadd's inheritance settled, there is only the (social) question of making a child, which Brick, being decent now, understands. He watches his wife with 'growing admiration' as she takes his pillow from his grasp and throws it on to their double bed, showing that she will not let him sleep alone on the couch. She then begins throwing his bottles of liquor out of the window, but he stays, still admiring her, though even five minutes before he would probably have preferred to throw himself out with the bottles. And this version ends with a speech from Margaret which is the quintessence of a specially modern sort of humbug, -- used to cover the sores of technical civilisation. She pities the 'weak, beautiful people who give up with such grace'; 'What you need', she says, 'is someone to take hold of you' -- which would be all right if we didn't know that what he really needs is another stiff drink. Men like Brick -- indeed, all men -- ask something more of life than what can be provided by other men, ~~or~~ or women. But it is one of the myths of the technical society that men are sufficient to men.

~~But~~ Margaret says something of the same kind in the first version of Act Three too, but it was not the last word in the play, her victory was not so clear and ordinary. Moreover, in the revised version, her speech is lengthened in such a way that she seems to have dwindled from Maggie the Cat into a sweet, rational nurse. But the story has been wrapped up. The

The characters have lost their claws. The author has reduced his theme to the inspid morality of 'good will to all men'. How absolute the collapse is!

Yet there is a great purity and gentleness in Tennessee Williams' work -- especially in his portraits of women. How, then, was it possible for him to turn Margaret from a real creature into a social formula? She is called Maggie the Cat, after all. In the first act she shows off her figure to Brick as she stands in front of the mirror, and says it still makes men turn their heads in the street. And when he tells her that he is disgusted with her talk she calls him an 'ass-aching Puritan'.

A clue to this -- and to the author's collapse into social formulae generally -- may be found in the Preface to the play, called Person - to - Person. He begins by saying how 'sad and embarrassing' it is that the artist's work should always be rooted in his own 'particular and sometimes peculiar concerns'. It is sad because it is such a lonely condition: we are cut off from each other, exiled each in his own skin, so to speak, and our efforts to get in touch with each other are a terrible strain on us. So for the most part what we hear is social chit-chat -- of the kind Big Daddy has had enough of. *Wals*

This of course is in great part the theme of the play -- the terrible difficulty of speaking our truth to other people, the effort it needs to think through the social humbug by which we are surrounded. 'Yeah, it's -- hard t' -- talk...' says Big Daddy, re-echoing the complaint we have heard from both Brick and Margaret. Most of the second act is taken up with a long conversation between Big Daddy and Brick during which they

try -- and for the first time succeed -- in having a really 'true' talk. Big Daddy tells Brick that he is drinking because he did not face up to the truth of Skipper's homosexuality, he let social disapproval get in the way of friendship; and, in return for this truth, Brick tells his father that the latest report from the clinic is false, and that he will die after all. During the conversation Big Mamma keeps bursting in, wanting to make peace all the time, frightened lest the talk will go too deep and touch on a truth she does not want to hear. Gosper puts his prepared, I'm-a-solid-chap-you-know face round the door, and his children, the 'Little Ones' -- the very mask of Humbug itself -- sing, 'We want Big Dad-dee! We want big Dad-dee!'

Everywhere the emphasis is on lying. 'Have you ever heard of the ^{word} mendacity?' Brick asks his father. And at the end of the act Big Daddy storms off the stage crying, 'CHRIST - DAMN - ALL - LYING SONS OF -- LYING BITCHES!' Then, 'Yes, all liars, all liars, all lying dying liars!'

It is a wonderful brave cry against the kind of world that gives rise to the sweet, rational philosophy of 'good will to all men' -- the world of level, affectionate relations between people beneath which the true violent feelings smart and burn and corrode, so that men of great character like Big Daddy live their lives like 'a closed fist' and the physical manifestation of this dreadful inner tumult -- ^ddemanded safe smiles and mild, sweet phrases as an outward accompaniment -- is cancer. We are made to feel by the play that cancer, with its agonising pain and its rapid, invisible proliferation, is only the bodily result of trying to live ~~as~~ not like a human creature, in hate and love, ~~the~~ ^{the} opposites that go together in equal strength, dwindling and

increasing together, in equal degree -- but like a social formula, always reasonable, full of 'affection', and with occasionally swift, muted darts of hatred, contempt and murderous revenge inside, quickly suppressed and never spoken about, like the first warnings of the fatal stage of cancer. It is a very American problem, as cancer, but above all the terror of cancer, ~~are~~ ^{seen very} ~~poignantly~~ American diseases. It is the dead end of the European middle class culture.

~~It~~ It is precisely the will to cover over life with social formulae of behaviour that gives rise to the feeling that our passions -- publicly revealed at last in art -- are 'sad and embarrassing'. Men who are ashamed of their own feelings produce 'experimental' or decorative writing. But Williams is not like that. He writes in good faith. But in the end he does not make an absolute break with social formulae. He gives the impression in his Preface that he is writing in order to communicate with other people. And that is a social activity. There is no sense of ^{Stendhal's} 'vers 1880...' as there is again and again in European books, even today. There is no sense of posterity, and this means that there is no sense of tradition. We ~~are~~ ^{are} each of us alone -- condemned to solitary confinement inside ~~his~~ ^{our} skin. And while we are alive -- 'Meanwhile!' the author says -- we try as best we can to overcome the barriers to communication. Of course Tennessee Williams is talking about the sense of exile which is our special state nowadays, unprecedented in Christendom. But he is also talking about the condition of the artist, and the artist is never unprecedented, he is always in connection with the past, so that he may bring it into new illumination. The impression one gets from this Preface is not that of an artist

trying to penetrate the mystery of his life, but that of a man simply trying to tell the truth to other people, the truth about himself and thus about their lives too. At the very outset, it seems, there is a bewilderment of values.

There is no sense here of a religious task for the artist, no sense of a mystery altogether beyond the world of you and me, a mystery in which we are no longer exiles from each other but under the same destiny (this is what makes the difference between truth and lies, that we do belong to each other).

In the play this mystery is suggested by the house and plantation, but then there is little continuity of feeling -- there are only sudden brilliant conflicts, followed by a lapse. It is like a man bravely struggling up all the time, but falling, because there are no voices inside his head to keep him calm and give him advice. It is art pushed into a vacuum because your audience believes that the only really serious activity in life is the production of goods and that to each man falls a technical function beyond which he has only a questionable being. Even the author suggests something of this kind: he gives you the feeling that a play, when it is finished, is handed over to the technical experts of the theatre -- producers and so on -- and becomes from that time on a technical problem. But in fact the idea of a play, even in performance, is a very simple one. Peasants do it very well. And the 'technical advice' is more often than not simply an objection to the values and feelings of the play, and express only the shames and fears of the producer, who is often quite a social man.

That Williams felt he was going against himself in taking his producer's advice is clear from what he says in the 'Note of